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PIERRE OBENDRAUF, GAZETTE

Westcliffe's Richard Hylands shows some of the new floors that will be part of the extensive renovations being done at Place Bonaventure.

# Sprucing up concrete block

## Westcliff updates Place Bonaventure with sweeping views of downtown

MARY LAMEY
*The Gazette*

What can you get for $60 million? **Westcliff Group,** one of Montreal's largest property owners, hopes it will buy Place Bonaventure a new lease on life.

Westcliff has spent millions changing the look and vocation of the La Gauchetière St. complex. Since acquiring the property in 1998, Westcliff has reduced its office-vacancy rate from 50 per cent to about 20 per cent, tailoring its offices to attract telecommunications companies, banks and insurance firms.

Now, Westcliff is reworking the building's retail floor, tearing up erstwhile boutiques to create even more office space.

"It is not our objective to be a destination-shopping location," said Richard Hylands, Westcliff's senior vice president. "We want to serve our office clients and exhibition hall."

The exhibition hall is being expanded and new links created so that visitors entering from the métro level will have direct access to the hall.

New windows and entranceways are being built to open the bunkerlike complex up to the city and bring more natural light into its interior spaces.

Workers have uncovered passageways that have been boarded up for decades and a grand winding staircase on the University St. side that has been hidden and unused since the early 1970s, Hylands said.

For the first time, visitors will be able to have sweeping views of downtown and the South Shore.

"There were a lot of alternatives we could have explored," the hard-hatted Hylands said as he led reporters on a tour of the work site.

"In the end, you have to decide how much money you're willing to spend and how many compromises you're willing to make. This remains a very competitive real-estate market and you have to make your building as attractive and functional as possible."

> **"In the end, you have to decide how much money you're willing to spend."**

Westcliff also owns the International Civil Aviation Building across University St. from Place Bonaventure. The two buildings are linked by an underground passage that will eventually continue as far east as the Palais des Congrès.

The firm plans to beautify University St. to turn it into another McGill College Ave., using landscaping, pennants and lighting to dramatic effect.

"We want this to be a grand entranceway to the city, something worthy of Paris," Hylands said.

The concrete landmark – squat, ugly and unlovable – has been a local fixture since 1967. It was billed as a city within a city, with more than 3 million square feet of floor space, an exhibition hall, showrooms and retail outlets.

Time has not been kind to Place Bonaventure. Retail action moved north to St. Catherine St. and the dark and windowless concrete structure struggled to hold tenants.

There was talk of turning it into a convention centre, until the Quebec government decided to spend $240 million expanding the Palais des Congrès.

MEDIA ALLIANCE

# Rogers, CanWest team up

## Giants will share resources and promote each other

PAULA ARAB
*Canadian Press*

TORONTO – **CanWest Global Communications Inc.** and **Rogers Communications Inc.** are joining forces in a deal that will see the two multimedia companies share resources and promote each other.

"Suddenly, now Rogers has got a television network and a huge newspaper network at its disposal, to cross-promote its products, to sell on its behalf," said Peter Viner, who was named this week as publisher of the National Post, the flagship newspaper for CanWest, which owns *The Gazette*. "And the reciprocal is true for us."

The Post had been losing $1 million a week for six months until layoffs and other cost cuts in September pared the losses in half, said Viner, a longtime broadcaster with a record of turning around money-losing businesses.

> **"Suddenly, now Rogers has got a television network and a huge newspaper network at its disposal, to cross-promote its products."**

In addition to its cable-television and mobile-telephone businesses, Rogers owns a number of radio stations and magazines, including the high-profile Maclean's, Chatelaine and l'Actualité.

"We are also going to use some Rogers radio properties to promote the Post," Viner said. "Rogers is going to use the Post to promote their cellular-phone division. It's that kind of thing.

"We will be working more closely with Rogers Media products in a strategic way."

Rogers has been looking for newspaper and television assets for some time. Last year, it thought it had a deal to take over cable-TV company **Groupe Videotron,** but **Quebecor Inc.** offered more money. There were also rumours this year that Rogers was looking at buying the Toronto Star, Canada's biggest-circulation daily.

For the Post, the deal will help it reach a larger audience and increase its subscriber base. "We're on our way," said Viner, who has been with CanWest for a quarter-century.

PAY-EQUITY CASE

# Top court will hear Bell's motion

SUE BAILEY
*Canadian Press*

OTTAWA – **Bell Canada's** bid to keep an epic pay-equity battle from going before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal is on its way to the highest court.

The Supreme Court of Canada agreed yesterday to hear Bell's argument that the tribunal is not institutionally independent or impartial, and cannot offer a fair hearing.

The top court's ruling could have far-reaching implications for the country's human-rights process, and might add two years to a fight that has lasted a decade.

"It's so discouraging," said Rocklee Johns, a Bell operator for almost 27 years in London, Ont.

She took a buyout last January after her job was contracted to a company that pays much less, she said.

**PREDOMINANTLY WOMEN**

"We're talking about a work force that is predominantly women. ... All of these people have dedicated so many years of service to the company and all they've received is a raw deal."

Johns, 50, expects to collect up to $27,000 in any settlement.

Bell sought leave in August to take its protracted dispute to the top court, a move denounced by the union representing workers.

"I think that they should be totally ashamed of themselves," Carol Wall, human-rights director for the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, said yesterday.

When a final judgment comes, Bell will have spent more in court than on settlements, she added.

The union represents about 4,000 current and former Bell operators who, along with some 18,000 clerical staff in Ontario and Quebec, say they're owed raises of between 10 and 20 per cent, retroactive to 1992.

The claims arise from a union-management study done in the early 1990s. Bell challenged the payments in court, setting off the legal wrangle.

# Advantage has high hopes

## Former Jitec wants investors to forget about troubled past

ANDY RIGA
*The Gazette*

PHIL CARPENTER, GAZETTE

**André Vallerand said Advantage Link is negotiating to reduce or eliminate the stake held by majority shareholder Benoit Laliberté.**

It has new management, a new name and new products, but the company formerly known as **Jitec Inc.** still has high hopes and ambitious projections.

Now called **Advantage Link Inc.,** the Montreal high-tech company became embroiled in an insider-trading scandal last year. The Montreal Exchange also described some of its press statements as "false or misleading."

Yesterday, new management – company chairman André Vallerand and chief executive Jean-Guy Proulx – said the firm's annual sales should more than quadruple to $16.9 million next year, and reach $24 million by 2004.

The company, which only has 100 customers, all in Quebec, expects to post a $2.3-million net loss on sales of $4 million. That compares with a $4.8-million loss on $2 million in sales last year.

The increase in revenue next year will come thanks to new services and an expansion into the rest of Canada, said the executives, who also talked up the possibility of targeting the U.S.

But Advantage Link has yet to sign any deals with partners who could help it sell outside its home province, the company admitted. For now, the company relies on its own small sales force. It employs 30, including sales, research and customer-service staff.

Advantage Link executives made the comments at a press briefing they organized yesterday. Vallerand, a former provincial minister who became chairman in August, said the aim was to show the company's potential to the media and shareholders.

"We want to cut ourselves from the past and make people forget that and think about what we're doing with Advantage Link," Vallerand said.

Jitec leased stripped-down computer terminals connected to servers at centralized control centres.

Advantage Link still offers the terminals. But Proulx, who took over as CEO in July, said its product line has expanded greatly. It now offers more types of software, as well as server consolidation, data centralization and technical-support management.

The target market is companies with between 50 and 250 employees. Proulx said customers can save up to 35 per cent by using them.

The Quebec Securities Commission said yesterday it is still investigating manipulation of Jitec's stock in the months after it went public in 2000.

The QSC has said Benoit Laliberté, founder and former CEO, traded and transferred millions of Jitec shares using multiple brokerage accounts while CEO, and failed to report all the transactions as required by securities law.

Vallerand said Laliberté is still Advantage Link's majority shareholder. Laliberté owns 19 million of Advantage Link's 61 million shares, but those shares are in a trust and he must vote his shares in favour on resolutions put forward by management, he added.

Vallerand said the company is negotiating a deal that would see Laliberté greatly reduce or completely eliminate his ownership. He wouldn't elaborate.

Laliberté still owes $1 million to the company and is repaying it in $25,000 monthly instalments, Vallerand said.

The total is to be repaid in full by the end of 2002, he added. Part of the repayment will come from a $500,000 debenture that comes due in June.

Advantage Link's stock closed at 15 cents yesterday on the Canadian Venture Exchange, down one cent. At its height in 2000, it reached $10.90.

BRIEFS

## Ontario talks tough on lumber

TORONTO – Ontario is taking a hard line on an American proposal to scrap the 35-per-cent U.S. duty against Canadian softwood lumber, saying it's still waiting for "a meaningful offer" and vowing not to abandon its timber pricing regime. Unless a better offer comes along, Ontario and Ottawa should pursue litigation to secure open access to the $30-billion (U.S.) market, Ontario Economic Development Minister Bob Runciman said yesterday.

U.S. industry officials insist that Canada's main lumber-exporting provinces must move to "open and competitive" timber markets.

## Aetna will cut 6,000

**Aetna Inc.,** the troubled health-insurance giant, said yesterday it will eliminate 6,000 jobs, or about one-fifth of its work force, and take a $125-million charge in the fourth quarter as it struggles to regain profitability.

The job cuts reflect Aetna's dwindling client base.

It has lost 1.8 million health-plan members this year, down to 17.5 million from 19.3 million in January, and it expects to lose more members as it raises rates and eliminates unprofitable medicare and health-maintenance organizations.

CP AP

# Remove transborder carrier restrictions: Air Canada CEO

*Canadian Press*

WASHINGTON – The president of **Air Canada** told U.S. airline executives yesterday that it's time for the United States and Canada to begin removing rules that keep foreign carriers out of their domestic markets.

Air Canada president Robert Milton briefed members of the Air Transport Association on his proposals for reducing, and eventually eliminating, restrictions in the 1995 Open Skies treaty signed by Canada and the U.S.

The treaty made it easier for airlines in the two countries to establish transborder routes. However, U.S. airlines aren't allowed to carry passengers from one Canadian city to another. Similarly, Canadian airlines can't pick up passengers at one U.S. airport and fly them to another.

Last week, Milton published letters to Transport Minister David Collenette and his U.S. counterpart, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, calling for a fully liberalized North American air-transportation market. Collenette was quick to shoot down the idea, saying Washington hasn't been interested in opening its domestic market to Canadian carriers.

Milton said increased competition from U.S. carriers would be better than re-regulation of the Canadian industry by Ottawa.

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